

PROVIDENT AND FRIENDLY SOCIETY FOR BUILDING AND ENGINEERING WORKMEN.

The committee of gentlemen appointed at Guildhall, on the 11th of December last, to consider the best means of promoting the scheme, having resolved on certain propositions, addressed a circular to the master builders of the metropolis, requesting them, with some of their foremen, to meet the committee, on Friday last, the 25th January, in the lower-room, Exeter-hall, to confer upon the subject.

The interest felt in the question was shown by the crowded state of the room, which was soon filled with builders and their foremen, to the number of nearly 400. On the platform were Professor Cockerell (in the chair), Messrs. Angell, Bunning, Hardwick, Roberts, Tite, Walker, Baker, Cubitt, W. Cubitt, Lee, and Sheriff Lawrence (of the committee), together with Mr. Hickson, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Munday, Mr. Ansell (actuary), and many others.

The Chairman opened the proceedings by advertising to the large number of existing benefit societies, and their numerous defects and failures from insufficient tables and malpractices. The formation of a Government Board to advise those who desired to join such societies had been suggested, and the committee believed it was in their power to do something of that nature. They disavowed all idea of a charitable institution, or of interference with any other societies. They assembled now as men should meet men, on a perfect footing of equality, and as craftsmen grasped his brother craftsman by the hand. Their first proposition was "That a fund be raised and sustained for the purpose of affording gratuitous advice, information, and agency, to workmen desirous of investing their savings in government or other valid securities. Also with a view to aid them (by temporary loan or otherwise), when by reason of sickness, accident, or want of employment, they might be unable to keep up their periodical payments." The committee would provide the fund referred to, and "open an office, and appoint an agent to communicate at convenient hours with workmen, and to receive the periodical payments." The second proposition was, "to recommend and assist workmen in effecting deferred annuities, under the Savings Bank Act, 3 and 4 Wm. 4., c. 14," which the committee regarded as the best mode of securing provident savings. To effect these contracts with Government, especially by means of weekly subscriptions, much agency was necessary, and that the committee would provide. The great advantage of this investment was, that the whole of the money invested would be returned to the party at any time he might wish to withdraw it, or would be paid to his representatives in case of his dying before the time fixed for the commencement of the annuity. Thirdly, they proposed "to bring within reach of workmen the advantages of life assurance, enabling them to secure to their representatives, at death, sums as low as 10*l*." The committee now invited the co-operation of the masters, and also suggested that the foremen should form a committee among themselves, first, to consider the matter fully, and afterwards, if they approved of it, to aid and co-operate permanently with the original committee, sitting with them at the same board on equal terms. He trusted they would dismiss from their minds all coldness, reserve, and unkind suspicion, and accept frankly and cordially this proffer of friendship from the committee. He attributed the failure of a similar project at Liverpool to the fact that it was promoted only by the master builders. The proper independence of the workmen—that feeling which was so honourable to them—led them to suspect the motives of a scheme originating with their employers; but in this case the most eminent architects and engineers had united with the distinguished master builders whom they saw present (of the purity of whose intentions there could not be a doubt); and if they now secured the aid of the foremen and workmen generally, it was impossible for the society to fail. If they could carry out this noble object, he conceived they would restore the ancient renown of the beautiful institution of Freemasonry, which had existed more than 1,200 years in the respect of all mankind, from end to end of Europe. Formerly that glorious institution made friends and brothers of all men; but in respect to themselves as craftsmen, it had declined in some measure since Sir C. Wren left the society in 1717. Let them now see if they could not do something honourable to the craft, truly advantageous to all classes connected with building and engineering, and calculated to benefit the widow and the orphan. He concluded by moving the following resolution:—"That this meeting approves of the suggestions offered by the Committee at Guildhall on the 11th of December, 1849, and requests these gentlemen to proceed to organize an institution to carry out the propositions contained in the printed circular."

Mr. Baker seconded the resolution. He hoped

that the exertions of the worthy chairman, aided as they had been by those around him, would accomplish an object which had long been wanting. Alluding to the plan of deferred annuities, he admitted that the workman might obtain these annuities without the aid of this society; but by the agency proposed, an annuity of 20*l*. might be obtained at a cost of 1*l*. per annum less than it could without such agency. Now, they were justified in expecting that 8,000 or 10,000 workmen, at least, would adopt this system of investment; therefore this society would be the means of saving, or putting into the pockets of the working classes, the sum of 10,000*l*. a-year, in addition to which they would have Government security, which he need not say was the best of all security. If at any time a deserving workman—a man of good character—should be prevented by illness, or otherwise, keeping up his payments for a deferred annuity, the Committee would be always ready to assist him to do so. These were some of the advantages proposed, and it was for the foremen, who possessed so much influence with the workmen, to aid the committee in carrying it out.

Carried unanimously.

Mr. Tite said, that although the unanimity with which the resolution had been carried proved that it had the full assent of the meeting, the committee were anxious to have something more than a mere silent assent to their suggestions. They sought, indeed, the entire co-operation of those whom they saw before them, to enable them to carry it out effectually and usefully. Government deferred annuities could only be obtained, under ordinary circumstances, by annual payments, or payments at some long intervals, but this society would be enabled to procure them by the weekly savings of the workmen, and in effecting that object the co-operation of the master builders was essential. Having obtained that, they now desired the earnest co-operation of the workmen also. Mr. Tite eulogized the advantages of life assurance, which, by the plan proposed, would now be opened to the working classes. What the committee sought was an assurance that they were in the right path, and that they were rightly appreciated by the skilled and excellent workmen of London, and he begged to move, "That a committee of foremen and workmen be appointed to confer with the Guildhall committee, and aid in the object proposed."

Mr. T. Cubitt seconded the resolution. He thought the proposed committee the best mode of accomplishing the object in view. They were especially beholden to the chairman, who had stepped out of his way in his regard for the interests of those whom it was more the duty of such as himself, the master builders, to look after. They were aware it was a difficult matter to invest small savings advantageously, but he thought there could be no better plan than that proposed to the meeting; and now that provisions were cheap, and there was no great want of employment, he believed that the working classes would be glad to avail themselves of it. The committee would advise and assist them in every way, and provide funds for the necessary expenses,—their object being that the whole of the money saved should go to the benefit of the person making the saving. They wished to see the working classes better their condition, and provide for a rainy day, and they would give them every assistance in doing so, but at the same time without giving to the society anything of the nature of a charitable institution.

Mr. Kaye (foreman), said, he could account for the silence of those around him, by the diffidence they felt at meeting, for the first time, the many honourable gentlemen who graced the platform. No person could deny that the scheme proposed was a good one, and that a vast deal of credit was due to the chairman and the committee. He only wished that such a meeting as the present had taken place when he had been a younger man. He was sure it would greatly tend to bring about a better feeling between the employer and the employed. He himself already belonged to a benefit society, and it was true that the proposed society could not apply to every individual; but if only one-tenth of the workmen in the metropolis could be benefited by it, it would do a great deal of good. It was more applicable perhaps to young, than to middle-aged men. A man of his own age, 41, must pay a large sum weekly to obtain an annuity at all worth having fifteen years hence; but if he could only, by saving a small sum weekly for that period, ensure half-a-crown or three shillings a week, at the age of 55, he would have done some little good. He highly appreciated the scheme, and begged to thank the committee for it, and having broken the ice, he hoped some of his friends would express their opinions upon it.

Mr. Ansell (actuary), being invited to address the meeting, adverted to the great advantages of deferred annuities, and illustrated the evils attending the failure of many existing benefit societies, by reading some extracts from a belittling list of the "Benefit Societies' Asylum,"—an institution formed expressly to assist those who, after contributing for many years to these societies, found, when they

became claimants upon the fund, that the society was insolvent or dissolved. The applications from those who had so suffered, for the benefits of the new asylum, were very numerous; amongst them were persons who had subscribed twenty-one, twenty-nine, and thirty-one years to different benefit societies, since dissolved. In the institution now contemplated it was not proposed to depend on the uncertain funds of any institution, however well managed, but to depend upon the Government alone. The ordinary societies, it was true, held out the prospect of an allowance during sickness, but that amount varied with the amount of the fund, and it often happened that the "box" was closed, when many urgent claims were made upon it. The present plan was a most valuable one, as it offered a reward for Providence and forethought. It was not even like a savings bank, where great losses might occur by the misconduct of the officers; for the institution of this committee was merely to facilitate the making of contracts between individuals and the Government; so that, except the Government itself should fail, these contracts would continue to exist to all their integrity.

Mr. Dines (foreman) felt that if the workman could insure the same advantages by weekly as they could by annual payments, it would be a great benefit to them. It would also be a great advantage if they could be confident that the money paid really went towards the annuity. He agreed with the committee that it was better not to meddle with the subject of sickness. The ability to withdraw the money at any time was a great advantage. He had spoken to many workmen, and most of them appeared in favour of a deferred annuity, rather than a sum at death. Besides the advantage of avoiding public-houses, he thought the present plan very desirable, as the widow of a member would be able to go at once to the office and receive the sum insured, without any trouble, and without the fear and danger of her claim being disputed, as was now sometimes the case.

Mr. Joseph Wood (foreman) called the attention of the meeting to the resolution before them. He quite agreed in the advantages of the plan, and its necessity in the vicissitudes to which a working man was always subject,—but the present object was the appointment of the committee. If appointed, he supposed that committee would be furnished with the resolutions and all other particulars, so that they might judge of the advantages to arise from the scheme. He had himself already insured 10*l*. a-week in sickness, 40*l*. at death, and 80*l*. to net him up in business in the event of any accident preventing his following his occupation as a mason, but he hardly thought that sufficient, and could make several other provisions, of which his family would reap the advantage. He wished to see in the new society the advantage of the safest possible security from such melancholy occurrences as those which had recently happened in savings banks. He was sure the whole meeting concurred in the advantages of provident savings; and at present he further believed that the chief feature in the plan proposed was the excellent guarantee it afforded for the safety of the security. The motives of such men as Mr. Baker, Mr. Cubitt, and others now present, could not be doubted, and he begged to tender them his most unbounded thanks. Another advantage would be the removal by this society of a great deal of the prejudice and ill-feeling that too often passed through their minds as working men.

Mr. Hardwick proposed a vote of thanks to Professor Cockerell. One of the foremen who had spoken, had said, he was glad of the opportunity of meeting so many architects, engineers, and builders, as were now assembled. He begged to assure him that the gratification was reciprocal. As it was the first time they had so met, he hoped it would not be the last, and he felt assured that the more frequently they met, the more would that good feeling and good understanding they were all so desirous to promote, be strengthened.

Mr. Sheriff Lawrence in seconding the motion, adverted to several of the points mentioned by preceding speakers; and dwelt particularly on the safety of the proposed security, the diminished cost of management as compared with existing societies; the benefits of the proposed office; and the freedom it would ensure from that temptation to spend money to which the working classes are now exposed at public houses. He hoped the foremen would discuss the question fully, raise their own difficulties, and be convinced, before they entered into the plan. They should not be led away by any men or by any fine speeches, against their own judgment.

The resolution was carried by acclamation.

The Chairman, in acknowledging the compliment, stated that the room they were in should be at the service of the foremen any evening they might appoint. He felt a twinge of conscience on the subject of the vote they had just passed, as he was bound to confess that he was not the originator of the scheme which the meeting had been kind enough to attribute to him. It had engaged the attention of the Builders' Society, through himself, seven years ago, but was then thought impracticable. When